

ETERNAL SECURITY

Can I Lose My Salvation?

by Steve Hixon



Life Perspectives from Fellowship Bible Church

Like many college students, I once backpacked through Europe, stopping at the local youth hostels and meeting interesting people. I've never forgotten a conversation I had with an Egyptian girl named Aziza. I was explaining my faith to her, and asking her about hers. "Well," she said, "in my religion we try to be as good as possible, and when we die, our good works and bad works are weighed in the scales. If your good works outweigh the bad, you go to heaven; if not, you go to hell." Aziza didn't seem too concerned about her fate; maybe she did a lot of good things. But the idea of my eternal destiny hanging on my own righteousness is pretty scary (hopeless is the word!).

But you don't have to be a Muslim to doubt your salvation.

John Wesley, the great evangelist and founder of Methodism, expressed grave doubts about his salvation up to thirty years after his conversion. He was often a slave to his emotions and circumstances. If he got sick, fell off his horse, or generally had a bad day, he would pour out his thoughts in his journal and bemoan his sin, saying things like, "I've never loved God!", or "I'm only an honest heathen."



Now, we all have bad days, but our theology should tell us that our salvation is more secure than our fleeting, subjective emotions or a bout with depression.

A Peanuts comic strip showed Linus and Lucy sitting indoors one day as it poured outside. Lucy exclaimed: "Boy, look at it rain — what if it floods the whole world?" Linus calmly responded, "It will never do that. In the 9th chapter of Genesis, God promised Noah that would never happen again, and the sign of the promise is the rainbow." "Phew!" said Lucy. "You've taken a great load off my mind!" Linus explained, "Sound theology has a way of doing that."

I have a chart that someone put together which shows the stages we go through in considering Christ and then becoming a Christian and beginning to grow spiritually. For instance, 0 represents accepting Christ, with 1 being assurance of salvation, 2 being a Christian identity, then on up to learning more, finding your spiritual gifts, assuming some leadership, etc. Yet many people stumble right at the start, or glide over that first step — assurance of their salvation — with the result that many months or years later they are still plagued by nagging doubts about how they stand with God. They may teach Sunday school, lead a small group, or any number of

things, and yet secretly wonder if they are close to doing the "one thing" (whatever they think that may be) that will sever their relationship with God and leave them standing in the cold, outside of His love and friendship, doomed to spending eternity without Him.

So what does the Bible say about all this? What does Scripture tell us about the nature of salvation? Is it something that comes and goes? Can you become a Christian and then go back to being a non-Christian? What about people who look like believers, and then their lives fall apart and they seem like atheists?

WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

Why do some people object to the idea that you can't lose your salvation? Well, there are problem verses — passages that, if taken out of context, seem to teach that a person can fall from grace. Others fear that eternal security will lead to license. Others, like John Wesley, just feel unworthy and can't imagine God loving them or being patient with their struggles. Here are a few answers:

1. Eternal security applies to "possessors", not just "professors". Those who are truly Christians can't lose their salvation, but some people merely profess to believe without having ever really trusted God (see Hebrews 4:1 and 6:4-6). James warns us in chapter 2 that "Even the demons believe". So obviously there is a difference between mental assent and actually bowing before God and coming to know him personally. Everyone in Jesus' day probably assumed that Judas was a whole-hearted follower, until the end. He had everyone fooled — except Jesus. So let me digress for a moment. How can you know you're a Christian? **Here are four tests:**

a. Have I personally trusted Christ? The Bible tells us that "to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). If you have honestly, consciously admitted to God that you are a sinner, and asked Christ to come into your life, trusting Him to forgive your sin and make you a new person, then you're a Christian. You may have been raised in a Christian home, been involved in religious activities, walked the aisle, or whatever — but if you have never personally received Him as your Savior and Lord, then you're not a Christian.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE TEACH?

b. Do I struggle with sin and regret it when it happens? The question is not “Am I perfectly obedient at all times?”, but “Am I grieved by my disobedience – is it something I want to be free from?” If that's true of you, it's probably a sign of God's work in your life.

c. Do I sometimes sense Him telling me that I belong to Him? In Galatians 4:6 Paul writes, “*Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.”*” This is called the “inner witness of the Spirit” where God tells us we are His own.

d. Do I see some evidence of progress (not perfection) over the course of my Christian life? (see 1 John 2:3-6) If there is not one shred of evidence in a person's life since supposedly becoming a Christian, no change whatsoever, then it is possible that person never actually received Christ. They may have had an emotional experience without really coming to know Him. Now, we are not to be judges of other people's salvation. All Christians have ups and downs, which can last for some time, but the Bible portrays believers as people whose lives have been changed.

Now, back to our answers...

2. Difficult passages must be taken in their context. A person reading Galatians 5:4 (“you have fallen away from grace”) might think this means one can lose his or her salvation. But a closer look reveals that Paul is talking about falling away from the “grace system” and going back to the “law system” from which they had come. The Galatians tended to think they were under the Old Testament Law even after becoming Christians, but Paul clearly states in Romans 6:14 that we are “not under law, but under grace.” They hadn't lost their salvation; they had lost their perspective.

3. We can lose rewards but not our salvation. When Paul talks about not wanting to be “disqualified” in 1 Corinthians 9:27, he is not inferring that he may be barred from heaven, but that his life may be wasted in a sense if he chooses to sin and walk in the flesh. He would rather use his life wisely, making it count for God's glory. (See also 1 Corinthians 3:12-15.)

4. God's discipline is not a loss of the relationship. He disciplined King David but did not condemn him; his discipline in our lives may be severe (1 Corinthians 11:27-32) but it is ultimately a sign of God's fatherly love, not of His abandoning us (Hebrews 12:5-11).

By far, the Biblical teaching about salvation focuses on what God has done, not on what we have done. For instance, in the first three chapters of Ephesians, one of the fullest accounts of our relationship with God, there is practically no mention of a believer doing anything at all. The emphasis instead is on God's initiative, God's choosing, God's redeeming and forgiving and adopting us. It is not as though he looked down and saw a bunch of people really doing well spiritually and just needing a little help. Romans 5:8 – says: “while we were yet sinners... Christ died for us.” Ephesians 2 says: “when we were dead... God made us alive.”

Those who believe a person can lose his/her salvation ought to be in constant fear of stepping over that supposed line. How far is too far? And it would seem that the Bible would tell us where that line was. But there is no mention in the New Testament of a sin that can destroy a person's salvation. The only “unpardonable sin” is the sin of rejecting God's Spirit, that is, of never becoming a Christian to begin with.

Let's look at three passages that deal with this subject, each from the viewpoint of one of the persons of the Trinity.

1. THE FATHER IS THE SOURCE: THE INITIATOR WHO GUARDS.

1 Peter 1:3-5

“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade — kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

In this passage God is the initiator. He is the author of “mercy” (not getting what we do deserve). He is the one who gives us “new birth”. The passage also describes what is called a unilateral covenant – that is, a covenant which is only dependent on one party's faithfulness. It is unconditionally guaranteed, as opposed to a bilateral covenant, which is conditional upon both parties' faithfulness. The Old Covenant with Israel was bilateral. But the New Covenant in Christ (like the Abrahamic) is unilateral – it is a promise by God that he will never break, despite our failures. “*If we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.*” (2 Timothy 2:13)

Here there is a three-fold description of the security of this relationship. First, it is **preserved**, (“it can never perish, spoil,

“Since my security depends on what God has done for me through Christ, then various works of God would have to be undone or reversed if I could lose my salvation... And since salvation is not something we earn or win, since it is not something we ourselves achieved, then it stands to reason that we ourselves cannot take it away.”

Chuck Swindoll

or fade”). Second, it is *reserved* (“kept”). No true Christian will ever show up in heaven and have the heavenly desk clerk say, “Sorry, we don’t seem to have a room for you!”. And third, it is *guarded* (“shielded”), which is a military word meaning to secure a fort. The Father goes to great lengths to make us feel secure in His love, as He says in Hebrews 13:5: “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

2. JESUS THE SON IS THE SAVIOR: THE SHEPHERD WHO HOLDS.

John 10:27-29

“My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.”

Jesus use the word “know” to describe his relationship with Christians. That word is a strong one that denotes a permanence, which is indicated by the fact that he gives “eternal life”. Eternal life does not begin when we die, it begins the moment a person receives Jesus Christ.

This passage also describes the two-fold grip of God on a person’s life. Christ says that we are not only held tightly in His hand, but that He (Jesus) is in the hand of the Father. It makes sense, therefore, that “No one can snatch them out of my hand.” Like someone once said, “It is like money that is in the safe and the safe is in the building and the building is being guarded by the army.”

3. THE HOLY SPIRIT IS THE SEAL: THE PROMISE WHO PROTECTS.

Ephesians 1:13,14

“And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession — to the praise of his glory.”

There’s an old hymn that goes “Return, return, O heavenly dove, I hate the sin that drove thee from my breast.” Obviously the writer felt that a Christian could do something which would cause the Spirit to leave, but this passage from Ephesians teaches just the opposite. Now, perhaps a person might read Psalm 51 and hear David cry out, “Don’t take your Holy Spirit from me.” But what was David asking? First of all, the Spirit did not indwell Old Testament believers in the same sense we read about in Ephesians, which we experience today. The anointing of the Spirit that David was afraid of losing was the special anointing of God upon the king of Israel – which David had seen removed from the previous king, Saul. So David’s lament is an entirely different situation from a Christian today.

Instead, what does this passage teach? First, that the Spirit is a *seal*, a sign of ownership and protection. In the first century, a

merchant had a carved wooden block with which he would stamp his seal on the ground around his pile of grain, for example, signifying that it belonged to him. In the same way the Spirit’s presence is God’s stamp of approval upon us.

Second, the Spirit is called a *deposit*, meaning a down payment, a first installment upon His future promises to us. When we buy a car or a house, we often have to put up “earnest money” to show that we’re serious about the deal. The Holy Spirit is God’s “earnest” to give us just a glimpse of what is to come. *2 Corinthians 1:21,22: “Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come.”*

Finally, the passage tells us that the Spirit points to the fact that we are God’s *possession* – people who have been *redeemed*. To redeem meant “the transfer of ownership by the payment of a price”. When God paid for your sin by the death of His Son, He came to own you, which cannot be undone. So in 1 Corinthians 6 Paul writes: “*You are not your own; you were bought at a price.*”

APPLICATION: What Difference Does This Make?

So, what should our response be to this teaching? Should we be smug and careless, flippant and unmotivated? As the Apostle Paul would say, “May it never be!”

1. First, we should worship. The result of all God’s works should be that He is glorified. These two ideas of eternal security and worship are wedded into one in the book of Jude, verses 24, 25: “*To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy — to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.*”

2. Second, we should be motivated to serve. Jesus said, “*He who is forgiven much, loves much.*” When we realize more and more what He has done for us, we naturally want to give our lives back to Him as a gift every day. When the Golden Gate bridge, was built in 1937, it cost \$77 million and was the longest suspension bridge in the world. But during construction of the first section, 23 men fell to their deaths, in great turmoil and grief, the builders constructed a giant net which cost \$100,000. After that, only 10 men fell, and all were saved. Did the work slow down with the greater security? No! In fact, it increased by 25%. As someone has said,

“Eternal security doesn’t make a believer careless, it makes him grateful.”